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Monday, October 27 2003

In the Driver's Seat

Most NASCAR fans will admit that their dream would be to race for 500 miles door-to-door, fender-to-fender, bumper-to-bumper in a Winston Cup race. But most of us are realistic enough to know that our biggest real-life driving challenge is no more adventurous than backing the minivan out of the driveway without destroying the neighbor's mailbox.

For fans with NASCAR IN CAR from iNDEMAND, however, you're in the driver's seat 36 weekends of the year. With the exception of taking in the scent of burning rubber or the odoriferous unpleasantness of a blown engine, NASCAR IN CAR brings you as close to the action as you can get without strapping on a HANS device.

For \$129 annually, the service is available to subscribers who have digital cable service. NASCAR IN CAR is on 599 cable systems and in 13.8 million households. As of now and at least through the 2004 season, it isn't available to satellite TV viewers.

NASCAR IN CAR offers 7 different in-car channels, real-time performance data displayed on virtual dashboards, and live team audio communications (yes, unedited and in its raw form.). In other words, it's got everything that race fans want to see and hear, including the roar of the engine and the banter between the driver and his team.

"It's an immersive and interactive experience," says Jeffrey Pollack, managing director of broadcasting and new media for NASCAR Digital Entertainment. "You vote each week for the starting lineup, switch channels with the custom-designed remote control, and receive live in-car camera feeds, live team audio, and real-time GPS and telemetry data on a virtual dashboard. Put all of that together and you really have a leading edge new media application."

That's NASCAR-speak for "Dude, this thing's really cool!"

Even though NASCAR and "democracy" are usually not associated with each other, it's the fans who actually determine which drivers will be featured each week. Viewers vote for the seven drivers from among all the cars that are carrying in-car cameras that week.

"What we try to do is give fans as much control over this experience as possible," says Pollack. "Fans are able to vote every Thursday and choose their starting lineup. We'll switch over during the course of each race depending on how the race is unfolding. But there is certainly no sense of favoritism here."

There is a dedicated production team at each race for NASCAR IN CAR.

"BST (Broadcast Sports Technologies) supplies the in-car coverage for the network," says NASCAR IN CAR producer Brent Imai. "We take those same feeds. Generally, it's a shot out the front or out the back, or 360 in the middle that they can pan around. Sometimes they'll give us a specialty shot like a suspension shot or valance shot. A brake shot is really cool sometimes... The network guys are still in charge of what view is being shown."

"We have four people in the truck and a dedicated engineer in here too," says Imai. "But it's really a culmination of all the work that's done in the Sportvision truck and the BST truck. It really brings it all together."

Fans also get a customized remote control when they subscribe.

"The remote control that we introduced this year has been incredibly popular with subscribers," says Pollack. "I wouldn't be surprised if that makes a return next year. It probably will. It's a customized remote control that provides subscribers with easier navigation among the in-car camera coverage. It has dedicated buttons for each of the in-car camera channels. There are also dedicated buttons for each of our network partners. You're always just one button away from the network coverage or NASCAR IN CAR."

NASCAR is rightly very enthusiastic about the success of NASCAR IN CAR.

"In a very short period of time, this package has been recognized as a leader in advanced television sports," says Pollack. "There's nothing else like it in North America. We think that it's helping define what interactive and advanced TV is. This is a completely immersive experience that viewers control, and viewer control is one of the keys to unlocking the advanced television future. We're doing it every week, and we're doing it in a way that no other sport is doing it."

NASCAR won't divulge subscription numbers, but are they satisfied with the subscriber rate?

"Yes," says Pollack. "We are keeping our eye on the long-term perspective here. This venture is important to us strategically. It's another way of increasing our exposure for our drivers, teams, and tracks. It's another way to get fans closer to our sport, and that is our overall commitment."

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- ☐ Joe Nemechek in the #01

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For as much outcry as there has been over commercials this year, don't expect NASCAR to ever market this as an alternative to the telecasts on FOX, FX, TNT, and NBC, even though NASCAR IN CAR is aired commercial-free.

'We're very focused on presenting this to viewers as a supplement to the network coverage,' says Pollack. 'This is not a replacement by any stretch of the imagination. If you're not watching the network coverage, you're not coming close to getting the full story. So we keep pushing viewers back to the network during NASCAR IN CAR because we want to make sure that they are getting the full story and that they are focused on the best way to watch a race if they cannot be there in person.'

Where do they go from here?

'We really have come close to perfecting the content,' Pollack says. 'But television is always a work in progress. The plan for the rest of this year and for next year is to keep refining it and making it as good as it can be. But I think we have a pretty strong offering today.'

Pollack is also very pleased with all of the media ventures that he oversees.

'From a new media standpoint, all of our partners are really hitting their stride,' he says. 'Turner Sports Interactive is doing an awesome job with NASCAR.com. TrackPass is a big success. The site looks better than it's ever looked before. There is more content, more services, more opportunities for fans to touch the sport online. NASCAR Radio on XM is great and XM is well on its way to 1 million subscribers this year. NASCAR TV on SPEED is in 62 million homes. They have a new prime time lineup, so NASCAR TV is being promoted in ways it's never been promoted before with more consistency, more of a sense of destination viewing. There's more NASCAR content on AOL than there's ever been before. Across the board, you can always do better, but all of our partners and all of our new media ventures are really hitting their stride. They're taking care of the fundamentals, which are increasing access for our fans and increasing exposure for NASCAR drivers, teams, and tracks.'

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